Field Reports

Field Reports are not reviewed by members of the Editorial Board of Cryptozoology *or other outside referees. Reported descriptions or results of fieldwork are the responsibility of the authors only, and are subject to criticism in the Comments and Responses section.*

Cryptozoology, 11, 1992, 90–97
© 1992 International Society of Cryptozoology

AN INVESTIGATION OF THE DUENDE AND SISIMITE OF BELIZE: HOMINOIDS OR MYTH?

MARK SANBORNE
29 Locust Road, Northport, New York 11768, U.S.A.

INTRODUCTION

In his classic compendium, *Abominable Snowmen: Legend Come to Life* (1961, Chilton, Philadelphia), the late Ivan T. Sanderson provided one of the few detailed accounts of the Duende of Belize (formerly British Honduras), in Central America. Referring to the Duende—Spanish for dwarf or goblin—by the anglicized form Dwendi, Sanderson described them as hairy hominoids between 3.5 and 4.5 feet (1–1.4 m) in height that allegedly inhabited the montane tropical forests of southern Belize. He also compiled reports of the Sisimite (there are various alternative spellings, all apparently derived from the Nahuatl term *tzitzimitl*), a hairy, Sasquatch-like giant from neighboring Guatemala. I subsequently discovered that the Sisimite was equally well-known in Belize.

Ever since reading Sanderson's book in the 1970's, I had viewed Belize as an intriguing and relatively accessible place to conduct cryptozoological fieldwork. My intentions were later solidified by reading Alan Rabinowitz's book *Jaguar: Struggle and Triumph in the Jungles of Belize* (1986, Arbor House, New York). In this account of his pioneering field study of jaguars in Belize's Cockscomb Basin, the zoologist author refers to the locals' widespread belief in the Duende and Sisimite, and even cites a personal encounter, brief and enigmatic, with what he says "looked like a little man, about three feet tall" standing at the edge of the nighttime forest. I finally arrived in

Belize in January, 1992, and spent the next three months traveling alone throughout the country on foot and by bus, often camping out in isolated locations (Fig. 1).

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

Just as important as my interviews with local informants was the fact that being in Belize afforded me the opportunity to study published materials available nowhere else. I was promptly shocked to discover that the Duende "myth" was so prevalent that the creature is actually depicted on a Belizean postage stamp as part of a series on folklore. There was also a wealth of information in *Characters and Caricatures in Belizean Folklore* (1991, Belize UNESCO Commission) on both the Duende and Sisimite.

Tata Duende—*tata* being a Mayan word for "old man" or "grandfather"—is most commonly depicted as a wizened, hairy little man with pointy heels, sometimes bearing a machete or stick, often clad in skins or rags, and always wearing a big hat (Fig. 2). (Sanderson ignored, or was unaware of, the accounts of clothing and implements. And he ingeniously explained the big hat by citing a chimpanzee he once saw in Africa holding a dead palm frond over its head like a Mexican *sombrero*!) The Duende is viewed as a trickster and a troublemaker, though generally not a malign one, and he sometimes rescues people lost within the forest. He is often credited with a facility for language, music-making or even mesmerizing powers.

The Sisimite (Fig. 3) is "best described as a large, hairy gorilla with a head much like a human." He cannot speak, and is a rather malevolent primate (unlike Sasquatch but similar to the mythical African gorilla of old) who will kill humans of the same sex and abduct and rape those of the opposite sex. He has four fingers and no thumbs, and sometimes his feet are said to point backwards, two anatomical oddities that are also attributed to the Duende in some parts of Belize. Both creatures are believed to live in caves deep in the "high bush"—the Belizean term for virgin montane tropical forest—although the Duende is sometimes "seen" in pastures and other more cultivated settings.

I also conducted valuable bibliographic research at the National Archives in Belmopan, Belize's tiny inland capital. The most interesting article I found was by anthropologist Michael Howard (1974, Kekchi Religious Beliefs and Lore Regarding the Jungle, *National Studies*, Vol. 3[2]: 34–49). Howard notes that the Kekchi Maya of southern Belize's Toledo District recognize three main classes of forest denizens. First are the major deities, led by *tzultacah*, a sky/earth, water/forest god. Next is a class of lesser, local spirits and personified beings (the Duende would probably fall under this heading, though the article does not mention it). Finally there are "various animals which are often considered to be in a close relationship with *tzultacah*, such as the *sissimito* [sic] and other more average animals like the mountain cow

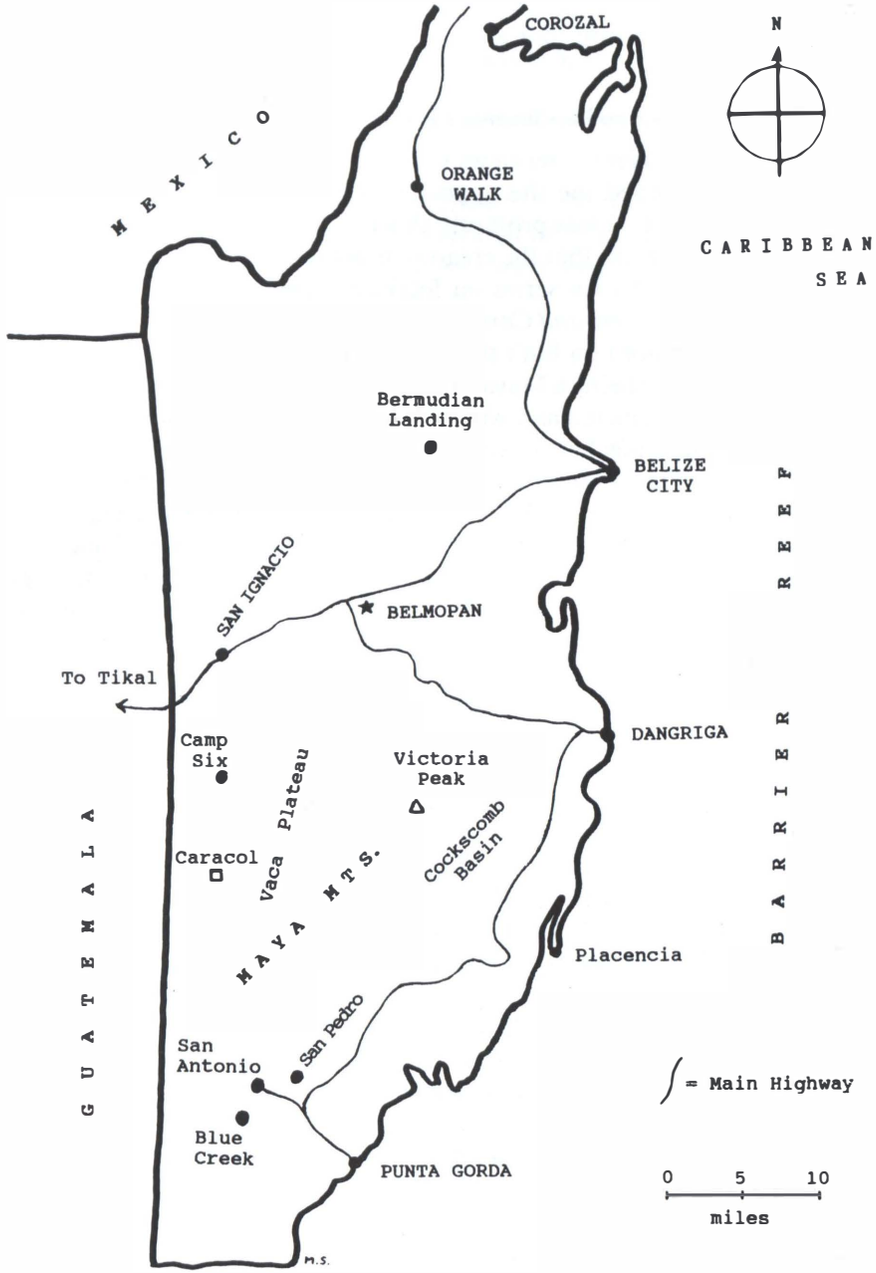

FIG. 1.—Generalized map of Belize (formerly British Honduras), showing major towns, smaller villages, and geographic sites visited by the author while gathering information on the Duende and Sisimite.

FIG. 2.—Popular depiction of the Tata Duende. Note hat, club, and backwards-pointing feet.

FIG. 3.—Popular depiction of the Sisimite. Often said to be like a large, hairy gorilla, it generally resembles reports of the American/Canadian Sasquatch (Bigfoot).

[tapir] and tiger [jaguar]." Thus, the Sisimite is clearly viewed as a rare animal, not a supernatural being.

The Kekchi see these special animals as indicator species present only in the healthy, undisturbed ecosystem of the "high bush." As this primary forest is felled, such animals retreat. Howard quotes one informant as saying: "Since the road has been opened and more people have come, *tzultacah* has taken his animals further into the bush, especially the *sissimito* and tiger." (The article also mentions a Kekchi description of the Sisimite as having "their big toes turned backwards," a possible explanation of the backwards-feet myth.)

What follows are the highlights of my conversations with various Belizeans, related in the order in which the interviews were conducted. First was a mestizo woman at the offices of the Belize Audubon Society, who said the Duende was a sort of spook in the form of a small, non-hairy man or boy with a hat. She said her brother claimed to have seen one once as a child.

Colin Young, a 14-year-old Creole boy at the Community Baboon (howler monkey) Sanctuary in Bermudian Landing, told me he personally did not believe in the Duende. But he related two interesting details from stories he had heard: that the Duende was covered with hair "like a sloth," and that it was so strong that a man who once tried to lasso a Duende was yanked off his horse by the creature.

FIG. 4.—The view from the ridgeline over the Cockscomb Basin, with Victoria Peak visible in the distance.

Chulin, a 62-year-old Mayan ex-*chiclero* (collector of *chicle* sap for chewing gum) from San Jose Succotz, near San Ignacio, laughingly told me he could not "remember" anything about the Duende or Sisimite. I attributed his reticence to one of two factors: either his lifetime of hunting and bush-whacking had convinced him that such creatures did not exist, or his evangelical Christian beliefs caused him to regard them as pagan demons.

Chulin served as my guide during my four-day trek to the ancient Mayan city of Caracol, located deep in the forest of the remote Vaca plateau. We spent one night at Camp Six, where we were hosted by another ex-*chiclero* and hermit, Antonio. A Jehovah's Witness, Antonio described Duendes as "demons."

I next spent several weeks at the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary and jaguar reserve founded by Rabinowitz, from where I staged a four-day hike to climb Victoria Peak, officially Belize's highest mountain (Fig. 4). My Mayan guide on that trip, Antolino Pop, said he had never seen a Duende or Sisimite, and was not sure if they still existed, although he recalled stories about them from his youth in San Antonio, the Toledo District's main Mayan community. On my last night in Cockscomb, one of the reserve's night watchmen, Galbino Pau, regaled with his own tales from San Antonio. He said his uncle had once been briefly abducted and left in a trance by a Duende

while hunting. He also recalled being frightened by the howls of the Sisimite while climbing in the hills outside the town; and he told of an American Sisimite-hunter who had been rescued from the creatures by a British army helicopter!

For the last phase of my trip, I traveled south to Toledo, the source of many stories. Leonardo Acal, a health worker and Kekchi shaman in San Pedro Colombia, told me that the Duende was a form-changing, supernatural being, a spirit of the dark representing the power of the land who could be summoned by a Mayan shaman using the proper prayers and incense. He said the Sisimite was "like Bigfoot." It was "not a simple animal," but a powerful ancestor of the Maya, a cave-dweller of the high bush whose appearance represented a harbinger to modern man.

In San Antonio, I spent a night at the only hotel in the area. Without initially mentioning anything about the Sisimite, I told the proprietor, a somewhat cosmopolitan Mayan gentleman named Mr. Bol, of my plans to camp out in the hills outside of town. He immediately warned me to beware of "the gorillas," and pulled out a Spanish-language comic book starring a Tarzan-like hero, which included realistic-looking portrayals of fierce, giant anthropoid apes. "That's what they look like," Mr. Bol said. He added that a local hunter had recently seen a huge footprint in the smooth earth of a *wee-wee* (leafcutter) ant nest up in the hills. He then repeated the tale about the American Sisimite-hunter, but in his version the hapless American had vanished and his bones were found years later.

The next day, and with some difficulty, I penetrated a good distance into the hills south of San Antonio, camping out that night on one of them. Needless to say, I was not accosted by any angry Sisimites.

My last stop was in Blue Creek, a tiny village southwest of San Antonio. I slept on a rock in a river outside Blue Creek cavern, a large cave alleged to be a Sisimite lair (unlikely, as it is visited fairly regularly by tourists). But Sylvano Sho, the site's Mayan caretaker and an expert in local natural history, related a fascinating anecdote. He said that only a few weeks before, a local man claimed to have seen a Sisimite in the forest along the Moho River. Sylvano and some of his friends had then launched a search for the creature, but without success. They then questioned the witness more closely, and he said the thing he had seen was between 4 and 5 feet (1.2–1.5 m) in height. So, "it was probably just a Duende," Sylvano explained.

I asked him if he had ever seen a Duende. Yes, he said, once under the bridge in Blue Creek village. He described it as hairy, and an animal rather than a spirit. But he went on to say that it was wearing something like a big black Mexican *mariachi* hat that appeared to be made of spun gold. When asked how an animal could be wearing a hat, Sylvano merely shrugged.

Results

The Duende seems to possess too many of the classic fairy-type traits to be any kind of valid candidate for cryptozoology, Sanderson notwithstanding. Assuming it is a purely mythical construct, its origins are unclear. It is also known in Guatemala and southern Mexico, so it may represent a melding of the classic Spanish *duende* (a troublesome household spirit) with Indian trickster/forest guardian beliefs. In Belize—a former British colony—the stories may have become further mixed with the fairy-faith of the British Isles, as well as tales by imported African slaves.

The Sisimite, on the other hand, seems to share many characteristics with the North American Sasquatch (leaving aside for the moment its supposedly aggressive nature, four fingers, and backwards feet). If one posits that Sasquatch is a surviving descendant of *Gigantopithecus*, it is quite possible that a relict population also survives in Central America. It is also possible, of course, that the Sisimite—and perhaps even the Sasquatch—are as "unreal" as the Duende appears to be.

There is also the "ape" question (Marc E. Miller and Khryztian E. Miller, 1991, Further Investigation into Loys's "Ape" in Venezuela, *Cryptozoology*, Vol. 10: 66–71.) If an unknown bipedal primate—also known as the *mono grande* ("big monkey")—indeed survives in South America, could it also exist north of the isthmus? If so, could it have contributed to the tales of either the Duende or Sisimite?

Whatever the case, my back-country trekking in Belize—a country the size of El Salvador but with a population of less than 200,000—left me convinced that it could be home to any number of undiscovered species.

Future Plans

Eventually, I would like to return to Belize and conduct more extensive fieldwork in the Maya Mountains, which take up nearly one third of the country, but which remain virtually uninhabited and unexplored. First, however, I plan to follow up on recent investigations into similar hairy hominoids in Indonesia (Deborah Martyr, 1990, An Investigation of the *orang-pendek*, the "Short Man" of Sumatra, *Cryptozoology*, Vol. 9: 57–65). The *orang-pendek*, at least, seems to be much more grounded in reality than the Duende.